WORLD CHRONICLE

UNITED NATIONS

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PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: The Right Reverend Sir Paul Reeves, the Anglican Church Observer at the United Nations and Chairman of the NGO Committee on the International Year for the World's Indigenous People

JOURNALISTS: Ian Steele, Press Foundation of Asia
Tuyet Nguyen, UPI
Norberto Svarzman, Televisa-Eco

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The Right Reverend Sir Paul Reeves, the Anglican Church Observer at the United Nations and Chairman of the NGO Committee on the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, discusses the issues of the world's original inhabitants. He calls on the UN system to lend more attention to the needs and rights of the indigenous peoples. The international order should find solutions for the socio-economic and environmental issues concerning the indigenous peoples of the world, Bishop Reeves asserts.

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Executive Producer:	Kamil Taha
Director:	Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant:	Judith Bennett Henry
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VOICE: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Of the five billion-plus inhabitants in the world, roughly 250 million are indigenous peoples. They're diverse in culture, religion, and social and economic organization. Yet today indigenous people are the most disadvantaged in society. They're the victims of unjust social policies, receiving the worst in health and education services, and ultimately are among the world's poorest. They struggle in the face of racism and oppression to preserve their lands and their heritage. What must the international community do to restore and protect these rights?

Our guest today has a strong commitment to the issues of the world's indigenous population. He's the Right Reverend Sir Paul Reeves, the Anglican Observer at the United Nations. He's also the Chairman of the NGO Committee on the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. A national of New Zealand, Bishop Reeves will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia; Tuyet Nguyen of UPI; and Norberto Svarzman of Televisa-Eco.

Before we talk with Bishop Reeves, let's look at one aspect of the struggle for indigenous rights. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports:

WHITEHOUSE:
The United Nations in Geneva: every year, indigenous peoples who are among the world's most vulnerable ethnic minorities meet here to discuss their problems. They represent the original inhabitants of lands later settled by people of other cultures. Their concerns range from fear of genocide to disputes over land rights. It's a dialogue between governments and native peoples. It's become one of the largest UN human rights forums.

For many delegates, the main conflict is with dominant cultures which they see as threatening even their very existence.

DEER:
"Our human rights have been violated left, right and centre, and so we feel we have to come here to the UN to try to let the international community know exactly how Canada is cheating its native people."

WHITEHOUSE:
Traditional art, such as striking painting techniques demonstrated in Geneva by Australian aboriginal activist Topsy Napurrula Nelson, more and more focuses on controversial issues. These include use of indigenous lands and natural resources.

Back home in Tennant Creek, a community in Australia's outback, a wall mural celebrates a success story. Ayers Rock, a national tourist attraction, has been returned to the control of the

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aborigines after years of legal battles. But it's just one of many sites needing protection.

Kunjurra, another rock formation, was going to be quarried by a mining company for decorative tiling. Demonstrations by Topsy Napurulla and other activists saved this traditional sacred site.

TOPSY:
"It's important for the children to grow up to know about our culture and our dreaming time."

WHITEHOUSE:
Some sites from the ancient dreaming time have been preserved for future generations, but many battles lie ahead -- not just in Australia. The Geneva meeting is one place where experiences like those of the aborigines can be shared. Native groups often come from remote and isolated areas. Meeting is an emotional experience that forges ties for the future. It creates a solidarity that gives the struggle a new and global meaning and the support needed to continue defending their rights.

[MORALES SPEAKING IN SPANISH]
"These ideas that I'm learning about here, I have to take them back to my people in Guatemala" he says. "This will give them more courage to fight against repression."

This meeting was working to establish international standards concerning the rights of indigenous

people. Ethnic voices, all too often silent, are at last being heard.

LITTLEJOHNS: Bishop Reeves, what is the precise definition of an indigenous person, indigenous people?

REEVES: Well, I don't think I can give you a precise definition. We're dealing with a very diverse group or groups of people spread across the face of the earth, but basically they are the original inhabitants of a land. Generally they have a spirituality which identifies the earth as their mother and the sky as their father and gives them a sense of context and a sense of responsibility and kinship to everything that's around them. My group, the Maoris from New Zealand, we would talk a lot about *whakapapa*, which is geniality. So we talk about our kinship, not simply with each other through the ages, but also our kinship with everything which is in this whole sort of created order. Now, this group of people, the indigenous people, basically they have been exposed to the process called colonialism and they now find themselves almost to be strangers of the land where they've always been. But now another more recent immigrant group has tended to define what are the rules and regulations of the lands where they now find themselves to be, and that is their problem. So they're struggling to retain their identity as a group, their identity with the world around them, and their place in the world expressed by the exercise of their own free and responsible decision-making. So those are some of the elements.

LITTLEJOHNS: Your committee, the Non-Governmental Committee on the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, has been rather critical about the UN arrangements for this International Year, particularly objecting to the limited participation of the

indigenous people in the arrangements that are being made, is that not so?

REEVES: Well, all this still has to be worked out, really, and one would have to say that the UN system is mid-stream in trying to work out what in fact they're going to do in response to the General Assembly resolution saying that there will be a particular year focusing on indigenous peoples. There's been one session of a technical meeting, held out in Geneva, and a second session will be held shortly. I was very disappointed at the first session in early March. The representation from the Member States was very small. The representation from the Agencies was abysmal. And there are reasons for that. But I think what we would be looking for is some demonstration on the part of the UN system that they wish to take the whole thing seriously.

LITTLEJOHNS: This light representation, that reflects a lack of interest in this question, you think?

REEVES: Not necessarily. I think it was called at short notice. I think also it did catch some of the Agencies unawares and off guard, and we here in New York have been trying to relate to UNICEF and UNDP in particular to try and get them to work out what their own position is about indigenous people. The difficulty of course is that the United Nations is composed of Member States, and indigenous people introduce, if I can say it, a horizontal dimension in a system which is a vertical arrangement. And so decision-making is exercised by the Member States, but the indigenous people don't feel themselves to be fully represented by those entities.

STEELE: Bishop Reeves, if I follow you, the UN is very much in the early stages of a learning process itself. We have in the title the "Year For" instead of the "Year Of". One would have

thought the "Year Of" would be somewhat more appropriate. We have had preparations for the Earth Summit, and one would have thought that the indigenous people who live most intimately with the environment and the resources, would have been front and centre on that agenda, and yet one was struggling to find word of indigenous peoples at all. What can you do to change that? Is there something in your approach? Is there something in the education of society that's lacking, that the message hasn't come across?

REEVES: Well, let's focus on the UN year in particular. Sure, it should have been the "Year Of" instead of the "Year For." "For" has a paternalistic ring about it, and that's very obvious. What we would hope from the Year is that in some way the UN, through its system, through its agencies, will bend itself towards the needs and hopes of indigenous peoples, and will indulge in a form of consultation, let alone decision-sharing, which will do justice to the integrity, let alone the sovereignty, which indigenous people feel for themselves. I would also be hoping that at the end of 1993 that there will be a decision to do something, let's say to hold a world conference on indigenous peoples under the auspices of the UN in a few years' time. I think that also will be allied with what will come out of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. At the moment they're dealing with a draft of the declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples. A lot is going on, and I just hope we can keep the pressure on so the awareness and the sensitivity of nations to this whole area will become something that's much more obvious.

STEELE: When you have only 250 million indigenous people in a population mass of five-plus billion, how do you speak for indigenous people as a collective?

REEVES: I don't know the answer to that question. What I would say though is that indigenous peoples are not always in a minority. If you have a look at the populations of some of the South American countries -- Guatemala, Ecuador ...

STEELE: Bolivia.

STEELE: ... you'll find that the percentage who are indigenous might be more than 50%. You might ask questions about their representation inside the democratic processes of their country but they're not always a minority -- that's one of the first things I would say. Secondly, 250 million does sound a lot to me, even over against five billion and I believe that if they put forward their viewpoints constructively and patiently and consistently, that the world community will hear.

NGUYEN: Bishop Reeves, the UN activities for the indigenous people and in view of the diversity of the groups themselves, it's not really possible to have a collective programme. Are the UN activities appropriate enough for their needs?

REEVES: Well, I understand that the General Assembly resolution really has two beats. One is to invite the UN through its system to make its resources available for the stated needs of indigenous peoples. The second beat is that there should be national programmes, and so each Member State should do something in its own context. And my committee, my NGO committee, we've just decided to go and knock on the doors of the states which actually sponsored the resolution through the General Assembly and to ask them what in fact they are going to do. So there is an international and a domestic agenda. Both are equally important.

NGUYEN: Some groups have fought and have retained their own identity and culture, some have lost theirs through colonization of their lands. What is the future now of these groups? You know, every country has some indigenous people. How to put them together?

REEVES: Well, the whole issue of identity is a very complicated one and of course we are talking about people who more often than not will be a minority within a total situation which may seem somewhat alien and threatening to them. And so that's difficult. Where I come from, Maoris in New Zealand are making at this stage a concerted effort to teach young people language. So we have what we call *Te Kohanga Reo*, which mean language-nests. We're seeking to teach young children from the ages of two or three language. We then are saying to the educational system what are you going to do to retain the fact that these children are bilingual. So, the whole business of identity and culture is very real. Secondly, history, people say it's a bit like trying to unscramble the omelette. You can't undo history. Our experience is you can undo history. You can look at it again through revisionist eyes. You can find instruments on a national or international scale which will allow you to appeal to the sense of justice, which is meant to be inherent in our democratic processes. So we are finding in Canada, in New Zealand -- at least two places I know of -- hopefully in the United States of America, and in Australia, or so to a degree, the fact that indigenous peoples are now able to get back things and also to get a share of the resources in order to be responsible for their own lives. There is some development; my feeling is they're doing better now than they did ten years ago, but I wouldn't like to predict what the outcome is going to be in the next 50 years. It's critical.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE.** Our guest is the Right Reverend Sir Paul Reeves, the Anglican Observer at the UN and Chairman of the Non-Governmental Committee on the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. Norberto Svarzman.

SVARZMAN: Bishop Reeves, the problem of preservation of the habitat and the culture of the indigenous people, at least in Latin America, is compounded by the problems also of poverty. Last year there was a meeting here at the United Nations discussing the way to preserve Amazonians and representatives of Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Guyana, among other countries, pointed out that the problem is that poor people from all the countries are marching towards the jungle and destroying it just because they don't have means of life and are looking for land to cultivate, etc. So we have the problems of the Indians, or the indigenous people -- Indians we call them in Latin America -- and the problem of the preservation of the forests, and the problem of poverty. So it's a whole big package. I don't know if this has been taken as a big package for your movement, etc.

REEVES: Well, obviously you've described an international economic and social situation in which indigenous people end up as the victims and I don't think the victims are going to find the solutions. The international order which created those circumstances has got to put it right. Now, the trouble is you can only chop down your rain forests once, can't you? When they're gone, they're gone. And I'm not even sure that when you chop them down that the monetary benefit flows back to the indigenous peoples. I would be pleasantly surprised if in fact that was the case. So I would think that after you've chopped down your rain forest the poor are still as poor as they were before that happened, and I would have no doubt that at Rio, for the countries of the North, while it was a conference on the environment and development, for the

countries of the South it was a conference on development and justice. So until we reach some form of economic justice in the international order, indigenous people are going to suffer.

SVARZMAN: Well, you see, the Yanomamö Indians in Brazil learned a long time ago, before all science, how to live with the forest and keep the forest whole.

REEVES: Yes. I'm more acquainted with the Punan people of Sarawak, the old Borneo, which I think is a similar situation, where they're hunter-gatherer people, and of course people often looked at a stretch of jungle and said "untouched by human hand" -- that was quite wrong. It's a piece of habitat which had been harvested by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. They'd harvested it and they had not destroyed it. They had managed to live with it. And such was the case obviously in Brazil. Once you take that environment away from those people, I don't know how they duplicate or replicate the life they've had for centuries. My experience is they tend to subside and become despondent, and become in fact a drag on the society in which they now find themselves.

STEELE: Bishop Reeves, why was the linkage with the Earth Summit for indigenous people so tenuous? We heard about global warming, we heard about the ozone layer, about biodiversity -- we never really did light on the people who are closest to the environment, and I didn't hear very much from indigenous groups *per se* in the preparatory process for instance stating their points of view.

REEVES: Well, I think because basically the conference was a legislating event. It is a whole process which sought to lead up to an occasion when conventions could be signed. So it was dealing with legislation. It's my experience that indigenous people have

rarely taken part in the process of legislating; they've been left out of that, and that's part of the difficulty. As far as their presence and place in Rio itself, well, I understand that they did put up a village and that there was a presence of people wearing their traditional garb and habitat, the things that they wore. I don't know whether they were substantially represented amongst the national delegations and if they were, I don't know whether they were then free to speak their own point of view or whether they really had to put a perspective which was that of the nation which sent them. I think probably it was more of the latter than of the former. I couldn't give you all the reasons why there was such a tiny indigenous element seen at Rio, but all I can say is that if that was the case, that is simply representative of the problem.

STEELE: Well, given that indigenous people are left out of just about every process, whether it's legislative or otherwise, that would seem to be just one quirk of Rio. I would like to come back to an earlier point. I wonder whether there's something basically wrong with the approach of the non-governmental organizations which speak for indigenous people. It's something in the approach that hasn't captured the imagination as so many other campaigns have. If we live in a world of communication, is there something wrong in the approach? Are you not out front enough for these people?

REEVES: Well, the best UN gathering that I go to is the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Basically the UN system is a series of boring meetings. The Working Group on Indigenous Populations happens not to be that. It is a real people's forum, and it is a forum of indigenous people and anybody who comes through the door can attend. I don't know of many other forums in the UN which allow that to happen. So there it is. It's lively, it's intelligent, it's very evocative. Things are said and connections

are made. I think the Working Group is excellent. As far as the representation of indigenous people themselves, for some of them to be represented as an NGO is a difficulty because they have a sense of sovereignty. And so to be seen as a non-governmental organization goes against much of what they believe about themselves.

NGUYEN: Some of the UN programmes dealing with the same issue prefer to expose the cultural aspects of the indigenous people instead of their political demands. When you deal with human rights, it's mostly political demands for the rights lost to, let's say the white man, like in the past. Why won't organizations focus on the political rights, which are the more difficult issues, than the cultural, which the UN can do through exhibitions and dances and music?

REEVES: Well, I can only imagine it's because they would see the cultural route as being an easier trip than going along the hard route of human rights. I would just draw your attention to the fact that the General Assembly resolution establishing 1993 as the International Year, has asked the Under-Secretary for Human Rights out of Geneva to in fact be the co-ordinator for the Year. So it sits under the Commission for Human Rights. So there is perhaps an opportunity to explore the issue of human rights on the basis of what is justice for one person must ultimately be justice for all. That is something which I can say but something which is extremely difficult to achieve in the international arena of conventions and agreements. But I hope that the year of 1993 will alert people to the situation of human rights and deprivation of those rights amongst indigenous peoples rather than simply seeing them as a backdrop which sings or dances, and against which important speakers can be heard.

SVARZMAN: Reverend Reeves, or Bishop, sorry, Costa Rica started the idea of changing the debt for nature to preserve the rain forest. Now, is there any plan to do something similar to protect not only the rain forest but also the indigenous peoples? Because Latin American countries, for example, they don't have enough money to start with these kind of programmes.

REEVES: Well, you're asking me to really make a comment in the political arena where I must confess I haven't got the information. All I can say is that in the extremely sensitive situation of Sarawak, that there are some people who feel that the answer is in fact to set aside a substantial park, call it what you like, reserve, which would be untouched, and where the Punan people could continue to live. There would be those who in that situation would want to get them out of the jungle in order to give them the benefits of civilization. I think that is a very dubious set of values which would inspire that perspective. So I can only hope. And I know one situation where it's been strongly suggested that the preservation of a substantial area of natural habitat for people who want to continue their age-old life inside that habitat is put forward as a practical solution. Of course, all that is within the context of international trade -- what you use the trees of the rain forest for. Now the woods from Sarawak go to Japan where basically they're used for sidings and boxing for pouring concrete, and once you've done that you throw them away, which is an awful use of somebody's traditional habitat. So I hope we can achieve something on that.

STEELE: What have you done to follow up on that link in Sarawak to impress upon the Japanese and others? How does one take what you've just said to the practical degree to politicize the public, to understand that their buildings are constructed through these processes? What is done?

REEVES: Well, NGO's can be helpful in that area.

STEELE: Have they been?

REEVES: Yes, they have. I can think of one called SOS, just sort of Save our Sarawak. I can think of some Japanese NGOs also, which are working hard at that end. I can think of visits to ambassadors here, and I have also been to see the Secretary-General about the same issue.

LITTLEJOHNS: On the whole Bishop Reeves, would you say that you're optimistic about the outcome of the International Year? Do you think it will really focus attention on the problem and get something achieved?

REEVES: Well, it's a bit like the Rio Conference. It's a step along the way. The thing is to keep stepping, keep going. And I think it will be something which will sensitize us and give us cause to feel that if we live now as if we believe the future is really important, we will change the way in which we live.

LITTLEJOHNS: Bishop Reeves, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Our guest has been the Right Reverend Sir Paul Reeves, the Anglican Church Observer at the United Nations and the Chairman of the Non-Governmental Committee on the International Year for the World's Indigenous people. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia, Tuyet Nguyen of UPI, and Norberto Svarzman of Televisa-Eco.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

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